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US-Soviet Relations May 1989

Background: Since the 1917 Russian Revolution, the US-Soviet relationship has evolved through several phases, including a period of minimal contact, a wartime alliance, an intense cold war, hopes for detente, and disappointments when the competitive aspects of the relationship proved dominant.

During most of this period, the Soviet approach to the world--their Marxist-Leninist ideology, vast military build-up, and pattern of intervention and aggression abroad and repression at home--made the US-Soviet relationship essentially an adversarial one, mitigated only by a mutual acknowledgment of the need to avoid nuclear war. In recent years, however, the Soviet Government has made significant changes in its policies and practices. Moscow has allowed greater freedoms at home in the context of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), and promised greater restraint and a less threatening military posture abroad. Should these trends continue and become irreversible fact, the basic nature of the US-Soviet relationship could be altered profoundly, but we are not there yet.

Soviet challenges: For many decades, Soviet policies represented a challenge to an open and peaceful international order. There are recent indications that Moscow's policies may be changing: the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, support for settlements of regional conflicts in Angola and Cambodia, implementation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and announced unilateral cuts in Soviet conventional forces, and moves toward internal democratization and increased emigration. But there also is significant reason for caution.

- Soviet military forces remain formidable and continue to modernize. In the nuclear age, they will be a threat to Western security for many years to come.

- Moscow still supports Nicaragua's and Cuba's destabilizing and subversive activities in Central America; and

- Although progress has been made in Soviet human rights performance, much remains to be done.

US policy: In a fluid situation with an uncertain outcome, the US must be prudent. We must maintain our ability to protect US security and that of our allies and friends with the necessary strength--military, economic, technological, and political--to counter the use or the threat of the use of force. At the same time, in a broad and constructive dialogue with the Soviet Union, we will seek to exploit new opportunities for a more cooperative relationship and encourage the kinds of developments that will contribute to a safer world.

Five-part agenda. Our approach toward the Soviet Union has taken into account what went wrong in the detente of the 1970s by going beyond a

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relationship based solely on arms control to include all the significant issues causing mistrust and suspicion between our two countries. This produces a formidable agenda:

- Addressing human rights, where the Soviet Union's behavior has been at the heart of many Americans' skepticism and mistrust. We are urging the Soviet Government to resolve individual human rights cases and institutionalize reforms through law. Much of the progress under Gorbachev remains informal and subject to easy reversal.

- Dealing with regional conflicts that contain the seeds of direct confrontation and that, for many years, have been a source of US-Soviet tension. We will press for Soviet efforts to facilitate peaceful settlements of difficult regional conflicts, such as Central America and the Middle East. These will be true tests of Soviet "new thinking."

- Enlarging the bilateral relationship between the US and the USSR, including increased cultural and scientific exchange programs, tourism, and commercial ties.

- Dealing with Western security concerns through maintenance of strong defense capabilities and arms control negotiations on a range of issues--nuclear, chemical, and conventional. We also intend to press for specific steps to address the problems of ballistic missile and chemical weapons proliferation.

- Finally, the new area of global or transnational issues--the environment, natural hazard reduction, narcotics, and terrorism--where the two countries share mutual interests.

Three principles: Our approach to the Soviet Union depends on:

- Realism about the nature of the USSR and the differences of history, geography, ideology, and national experience that set us apart and guarantee that relations will continue to be largely competitive. Our task is to deal with the competition, not ignore it.

- The necessity for Western strength--our military power, our economic health, and the cohesion of our alliances. Our success in dealing with the Soviet Union is due in part to the solid support that the Western agenda enjoys--both in the US and Europe.

- A dialogue--the effort to deal candidly with problems that have accumulated in East-West relations over the past four decades.

Transformations now underway in the USSR are a source of hope. If the West stays realistic about the challenge, and strong, united, and creative in its diplomacy, we have a good chance to strengthen international stability and explore the possibility of substantial change for the better in East-West relations. Although we have no guarantees that the adversarial element will disappear from the relationship, we are committed to increasing cooperation where possible and continuing to narrow differences between us.

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